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The LEADING LADY

GERALDINE BONNER

THE STORY

PROLOGUE—While dependent over the enforced hiding of her fiancé, Jim Dallas, slayer in self-defense of Homer Parkinson, member of an influential family, Sybil Saunders, popular actress, is engaged to play Viola in a charity performance of "Twelfth Night" on Oak Island on the Malibu coast.

CHAPTER I—After the play, which is a big hit, Wally Shine, official photographer, learns something of the jealousy, professional and otherwise existing in the company.

CHAPTER II—Hugh Bassett, director of the play, and Anne Tracy's fiancé, tells Joe he has heard he is spying on Sybil in an effort to learn the whereabouts of Jim Dallas and earn the reward offered by the Parkinson family. The boy's denial is not convincing.

CHAPTER III—Joe Tracy is arranging for a vacation trip. To Anne he betrays his enmity toward Sybil. Stokes tells Sybil he has news of Jim Dallas, and to secure the necessary privacy they arrange to meet in a small summer house near the main building.

CHAPTER IV—The sound of a pistol shot startles the assembled company. Investigation shows a revolver has been taken from a desk in the library. Flora Stokes bursts in with the announcement that Sybil has been shot and her body carried off by the swift tide that races by the island.

CHAPTER V—Flora Stokes tells Bassett she saw Sybil shot but did not see the murderer. Bassett notifies the sheriff, Abel Williams. He arrives with Rawson, district attorney, and a man called Patrick. All the company is accounted for with the exception of Joe Tracy, presumably on his trip. Flora gives her evidence, and the authorities arrange so that no one can leave the island.

CHAPTER VI—Discussing the tragedy with Rawson and Bassett, Williams voices the opinion that Flora Stokes is the guilty person, the deed being actuated by jealousy. While they are talking, the sound of a crash in the living room makes them hasten there.

CHAPTER VII—Anne Tracy, shocked at her friend's awful death, is also uneasy about Joe. Remembering his rage against Sybil, and realizing she is not sure he left the island, her imagination conjures up as Sybil's murderer, and hiding in the house, the upper story of which is unoccupied. Seeking to inform him of the close watch kept, she descends to the living room. There she dimly sees Joe and warns him to try to escape. He disappears, and in her agitation she knocks over a lamp. She tells the three men she came downstairs for a book, and her explanation is accepted.

CHAPTER VIII—In the summer house the investigators find evidence that Sybil has been there, and knowing of Stokes' infatuation, Rawson and Williams at once suspect him of the murder.

CHAPTER IX—Stokes denies all knowledge of the crime, and deftly throws suspicion on Joe. Rawson, somewhat impressed by the story put forward by Stokes, goes to the mainland to investigate Joe's movements.

CHAPTER X—Tortured by her thoughts, Anne visits the unoccupied upper story, seeking Joe, but finding nothing. Rawson returns with the information that young Tracy had not left the island. Suspicion is at once turned toward him, and arrangements are made for a search of the top story of the building, about the spot on the island where a person could find a hiding place. Rawson and Williams return, having found no trace of Joe, or anybody else, in the upper part of the building.

CHAPTER XI—Anne insists that Joe must somehow have left the island. Anne tells the amazed Bassett she saw Joe in the living room the night before, and that he must be hiding in the house.

CHAPTER XII—That night Shine arranges to take a snapshot of anyone seeking to leave the house. Suppose makes the attempt, and a picture is taken. Developed, everyone's astonishment it shows the face of Sybil Saunders. Overcome by the sight, Stokes insists it can't be Sybil, because he had shot her, and collapsed.

CHAPTER XIII

WILLIAMS thought highly of his idea. It had come to him that morning while thinking of the person he had heard descending the stairs, the person he insisted was Mrs. Stokes.

It was a simple and practical plan—a watch kept for the rest of the night on the stairs and certain points of exit. In the face of positive orders two people had come from the upper floor the night before, Miss Tracy on an errand that Rawson thought suspicious. Mrs. Stokes, in Williams' opinion, to communicate with her husband. Even if both men were wrong, some powerful incentive was making them take such risks, and it was natural to suppose that incentive might be strengthened after twenty-four hours of strain and uncertainty. They might try it again, and to catch them at it, surprise them in the act—if they didn't break down on the spot—a little grilling would do the job.

Rawson looked at his assistant with an approving eye. The idea was good, excellent, and without waste of time they arranged the distribution of the watch. Williams would take the front stairs; his particular prey was there and he had already located the position of the electric light button. Rawson would station himself in the kitchen with its two doors, one to the outside, one to the hall. The living room they would assign to Shine, less important than either of the other ambushes, but commanding the entrance to the side wing and the path to the causeway and dock.

Between hanging locks of hair, dropping a shower of questions on the men below. One of them was hysterical and gave forth a sobbing wail, and Williams shouted with angry authority: "Keep quiet up there. Nothing's the matter. Didn't you hear it was a flashlight?"

Some one strangled a scream—Williams thought it was Flora, but could not be sure. Then they made a simultaneous retreat to the bedrooms for negligees and slippers, while the men, gathered round Shine, listened to his explanation. No, he'd seen nothing and heard nothing, but he'd got the picture all right; whoever it was, he had them. Now he'd go and develop it—he could do that in a few minutes—and there was a projector in the corner he could use. Throw it onto something where they'd all see. A sheet over that screen-by the desk, would do.

They urged him out, they'd attend to everything; hurry up with the picture. Williams was unable to hide his elation. His idea, augmented by Shine's, was a bulls-eye hit, and his voice showed an excitement that he called to Miss Pinkney to bring a sheet. Rawson's satisfaction was less apparent, but his eye was alight with anticipation. If it was the boy, he had run back upstairs, for no exit had been attempted through the kitchen. With the whole house astrir he'd be afraid to come down, and they had him safe as a rat in a trap. Impatient at the wait for Shine's reappearance, he left the room, saying he was going to the bathroom for a word with Patrick.

The noise of the women's footsteps on the stairs came in a descending rush. They came in, their voices going before them, a scattering of gasped, explosive utterances. "Can't you d-d women keep still!" Stokes ground out between his teeth.

Rawson re-entered. He had heard that as he came up the path and stopped on the threshold looking at Anne, waiting to see if she would speak. But she said nothing, standing by Bassett, her hand braced against a table, her gaze on the floor. She knew Rawson was watching her, and would her form or an upraised eye, her face a story of blankness. If she could hold herself this way, not move or speak, she could bear the tension. A touch, a word, and she felt that he body might break to pieces and her voice ascend in long-drawn screams to the skies.

The screen under the white covering was set in the place Shine had indicated, the projector put some distance back facing it. To some of them these preparations had the hideous significance of those preceding an execution, and all of them felt the deadly oppression of the approaching climax. The room was very still, as if an enchantment lay on it. At intervals Mrs. Cornell drew her breath with a low moaning sound. Stokes' hand clenched and unclenched on the chair-back, and Williams looked at his watch. He began a guttural murmur of impatience and stopped as the door opened and Shine came in.

He came quickly, bringing an air of excitement to the already tightly charged atmosphere. There was a bewildered agitation in his face, and his words were broken and uncertain as he answered Williams' question.

"Oh, yes, I got it—something—I can't quite make out—got me sort of flustered hurrying so. You'll have to stand away there, folks." He turned to the projector, adjusted it, then held the negative out towards Williams. "We'll probably lose this, Mr. Williams. Doing it so quickly I couldn't fix it. It'll likely melt with the heat in here, won't last more than a few minutes. You don't want to keep it, do you?"

"Go ahead. It's only the picture—that's all that concerns us." "All right—it's your say-so. You'll get it in a minute now and by gum, I want to see."

He stopped, his breath caught, his hands busy with the machine. "Now, then, we're ready. Some one please put out the lights."

Miss Pinkney pressed the button and the room dropped into darkness.

A picture leaped into being on the screen. The door-frame backed by solid, indistinctly black, the edge of a door, and beyond it, the outlines melting into the darkness, the suggestion of a head and shoulders, only the face showing clear, looking at them with wide questioning eyes—Sybil Saunders' face.

The silence held a moment, then broke in an explosive volume of sound. The women's shrieks rose simultaneously—"Sybil! Sybil!" The name ran about the room, beat on the high ceiling and was buffeted from wall to wall.

"The dead woman?" Williams shook Shine's arm in his incredulous amazement.

"It is—it's her. I saw it when I developed it, and I don't know—something's gone wrong."

A raucous cry rose above the chorus of female voices. Stokes had dropped his hold on the chair, his startled eyes fixed on the picture. From his lips, curled back like an angry dog's, came a stranding rush of words:

"She's dead! She's dead, for I killed her. I shot her—she's dead. She can't come back, she can't come back. I shot her as she ran—I killed her—I saw her fall—she's dead—dead!"

The words died in a groan. He pitched forward and lay a withering, moaning shape with hands that clawed and dug into the carpet. The men pushed at him, clustered about him, the women watched in dumb horror, while the picture behind them, slowly faded from the screen.

(Continued Next Week)

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